FINAL PERFORMANCE REPORT

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Planning for a Curatorial Center at The Franklin Institute

Karen Elinich, Project Director

The Franklin Institute

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NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

Overview:

The Planning Project for a Curatorial Center sought to respond to the need to appropriately manage and increase access to The Franklin Institute's collections of material culture and archives related to the history of science, technology, photography, design, and the arts located both on- and off-site. During the course of this project, nine separate collections storage areas on-site and two off-site locations were evaluated for relocation to a central curatorial center. The planning team evaluated three different locations across the building to assess their suitability to serve as the ultimate location of the center. Additionally, the team produced a budget of higher- and lower-cost alternatives to guide the Institute's senior leadership team and offer them flexibility during implementation. Development of the plan stalled at various points in the process, largely due to a holistic strategic planning process at the Institute undertaken in advance of the 200th anniversary of The Franklin Institute in 2024. That said, the work of the original planning team informed a new strategy and design for a curatorial center at the Institute, the plans for which have been integrated into the Institute's new master plan.

Though major projects have been implemented to provide care for the collections and to improve digital access, the design and construction of the curatorial center demonstrates the largest project launched in support of the collections in alignment with museum goals. In response to a General Conservation Assessment Report in 2000, the Institute added a position in collections care, installed dust covers, and formalized housekeeping protocols. Responding to a 2004 AAM Museum Assessment Program study, the Institute expanded the interpretive use of its collections, especially online through the *History of Science & Technology* exhibit and CSA case files. Past accreditation reviews by the American Alliance of Museums, especially that of the 2008 review, expressed concern about temperature and relative humidity control, and about collection areas in "nooks and crannies" of the building. In 2010, a CCAHA Preservation Planning Stewardship Program refined the Institute's goals for collections storage and security. Improvements in collections management have been made over the years.

Recognizing a curatorial center would be a significant improvement to the dispersed collections stored around the building in terms of access to the collections as well as managing the environmental controls of the storage and display areas, a preliminary design schematic was delineated. In 2008 the Institute commissioned SaylorGregg Architects to produce a curatorial center design sketch, intending to incorporate a new collections facility into a capital campaign for a major building expansion. When the economic downturn hit in the midst of the capital campaign, the collections renovation was, ultimately, not sustained through the development of the previous strategic plan. The planning project approved by NEH in 2014, attempted to reintroduce the importance of a centralized curatorial space in alignment with the Institute's 2013-2018 strategic plan to reach broader audiences with enhanced learning opportunities by coordinating educational programming across onsite, community, and online paths.

At this time of this report, The Franklin Institute has entered the 2017-2024 strategic plan, which aims to honor Benjamin Franklin's legacy by creating engaging experiences at the museum that cultivate curiosity, critical thinking, and an understanding of the crucial role science plays in our lives.

Project Activities:

As suggested in the work plan introduced in the proposal, the first meeting of the planning team was at The Franklin Institute on November 18, 2014. This began phase one of the project by introducing the planning team to foundational resources and the Institute's collections. Elinich, Alviti, and Carroll arranged a meeting of the members that began the accumulation of information about the Institute's collections. Team members' essential background and contact information was shared with the group. Hand-outs included: logistical information about the project--including the timeline, scope of work, design objectives, and deliverables; a detailed description of the collections; floor plans and descriptions of existing collections locations; results of environmental monitoring; the 2008 preliminary design sketch and budget; the Institute's Strategic Plan and Collections Policy; and resources on sustainable collections preservation strategies. The information was also provided on external drives supplied to team members. The team toured the nine existing onsite collections locations and the basement site for the planned facility in order for the team to grasp the accessibility challenges for the staff and researchers who currently use the collections and the audiences the Institute hoped to reach with a new design. After returning to the meeting space, discussions were held about the proposed timeline for the project, and suggestions of additional resources concerning research, standards, and practices for sustainable preservation strategies that should inform the planning process were shared with the team. A post-meeting report from the administrative group was supplied to the team. In addition to a list of resources for sustainable practices, insights from the team discussion were shared which included developing an internal collections team with staff from various departments, the impact to staff of relocating them to create a new space, and the benefits of visible storage. At the end of phase one, it was decided that a main, accessible collections space with visible storage to enhance the guest experience was of utmost importance. At the end of phase one, a conclusion could not be reached as to where the on-site curatorial center would be located.

Phase two of the work plan commenced with a meeting in March 9, 2015. At the recommendation of the planning team, select team members visited four sites with visible storage and compiled images of the sites and the benefits of various spaces to share with the team at this meeting. Team members with architectural experience shared information on the successes and failures of the various projects in which they had been involved. It was specified that no site has all of their collections in a visible storage area and that some behind-the-scenes storage would need to exist. Discussions were had about core infrastructure elements, including the existing basement space and systems, a proposed floor plan, and available HVAC, lighting, fire protection, and security systems. At this meeting, the team delved into the "pros and cons" of potential on-site locations, recognizing the restriction that no new major construction could occur. Characteristics weighed in determining the viability of various on-site locations were, the size of the footprint, the environmental parameters needed for the safety of the artifacts, and the ease of wayfinding for the museum's visitors or how connected the visible collections would be to the current core exhibitions.

In the weeks following the meeting, planning team members continued to share pros and cons for the various locations and a decision matrix was developed to address various characteristics and concerns. The architecture and engineering experts on the team did not feel there was enough information about major design elements to specify lower-cost and higher-cost infrastructure options, but they did express that from an engineering perspective, there are more advanced construction possibilities than in 2008. The design sketch from 2008 proved to be outdated and did not benefit from the extended collaborations of Institute staff and outside experts that this planning process allowed. Team responses indicated that they were aware of the multitude of challenges, but also motivated to address the challenges to plan for a better future for the collections. At the close of phase two, evaluating three spaces as the museum's goals were changing required collecting more data to make educated decisions about how the design of a new space would best serve visitors and researchers.

Phase three of the planning for the collections space, initially planned to begin in July of 2015, was delayed due to various factors impacting the size of the collection, as well as the feasibility of one of the spaces in consideration. The Institute had entered into conversation with another museum about acquiring their collection as a single lot. The collection was historically valuable, extremely well-documented, and in excellent condition, and included approximately 2,300 3D and 37,000 2D artifacts on the subject of business technology. The potential acquisition of this collection dramatically altered the discussion in the charrettes because the planning team had to now consider the Institute's current collection, as well as almost doubling the collection when thinking about space and equipment. After lengthy internal deliberation with executive staff and numerous visits with the president of the donating museum, late in 2016, the Institute decided not to acquire the extensive collection. The thought was that acquiring the collection would force a refocus of the narrative around business machines, would require at least $3 million simply to procure it, not to mention the on-going costs, and would limit the Institute's capacity to grow. The Institute determined that one of the strengths of its collections is its variety in support of the mission and a wider range of storytelling possibilities.

At around the same time—motivated by the planning team's charge that there were more engineering possibilities when considering the design of a collections center—conversations began with Keast & Hood about performing a structural engineering study of the Library Stack area to make determinations about the future of the space as a collections area. The study was initiated in late 2016 and included evaluating historical blueprints, imaging the area for a CAD schematic, and evaluating floor load capacity. This study was integral in determining the viability of the Library Stack area as an optional collections space for the planning team to consider. The results were returned in early 2017 and it was determined that the Library Stack area could support the floor load needed for the collections space and that, contrary to previous assumptions, the structural frame of the stack area could be removed with some temporary supports in place during construction.

Personnel changes further influenced the pace of the project. In early 2018, John Alviti, Planning Team Co-Chair, retired after 23 years at The Franklin Institute. In addition to his absence from the grant team, the loss of this institutional knowledge, the transition of responsibilities to other staff, and the initiation of records processing delayed the functions of the planning team. Due to institutional restructuring in

preparation for the strategic plan mentioned above Karen Elinich, the Planning Team Project Director, could no longer lead the activities of the team.

In mid-2017, a new strategic plan was developed to reimagine much of the building's public and staff spaces. The planning team's activities were halted as an external master planning firm was engaged to assist with the design and implementation of the new strategic goals. Informed by the input from the planning grant team as well as the suggestions from AAM's evaluations, an upgrade in collections care and access became one of the initiatives of the new strategic plan. To ensure alignment with the larger master plan and maximize the ability to intellectually integrate the museum's collections in support of the restructured strategy, the Institute's leadership decided to merge the collections planning work with the larger museum's master planning goals.

The groundwork laid by the planning grant team supported the current commitment to design and implement construction on a new collections center at The Franklin Institute. Guided by the four core design objectives of the planning team, the new curatorial center design plan will feature an upgraded space that maintains environmental conditions suitable for the collections. Sustainable design and collections conservation strategies will be used in the design of the space—greatly improving access to the collections by staff and visitors while reducing the number of storage sites and enhancing integration of the collections into the Institute's educational programs through increased physical and digital access. Connecting the collections storage to the museum galleries and offering visitors a view of what has typically been "behind the scenes" in museums can be a great way to inspire interest in preservation and conservation and to engage visitors in understanding a museum's responsibility to care for its collections in perpetuity. A digital component of the curatorial center will aid in user-directed contact with information about specific artifacts, and allow staff to virtually highlight artifacts for specific educational programs, exhibitions, or other tailored events targeting families, school groups, and adults age 18+.

In line with the 2017-2024 strategic plan, the goal of the future collections space, slated to be opened in 2024, the Institute's 200th Anniversary, is to create a place-based center to explore the Institute's broad collections and to provide an immersive experience by exposing visitors to formerly behind-the-scenes experiences. The curatorial center will support the vision of the museum by promoting the critical role that science and technology has, and continues to play in our lives.

A gem of an opportunity is the re-interpretation and revitalization of one of The Franklin Institute's most prized objects: the Baldwin Locomotive currently displayed in the Train Factory. Located at the ground level, and one floor below (the Foundation level), this iconic and technological marvel will be part of a new collections-based experienced called Treasures of The Franklin Institute. The new plan links The Franklin Institute's present to its history and iconic artifacts. Visitors will walk around the Baldwin 60000 steam locomotive on a cutaway floor; below they will look into The Franklin Institute's archival collections. Open storage casework will hold unique technological artifacts, long out of sight, now restored and chosen for display. Here, visitors will experience an open-collections type environment where a bust of Benjamin Franklin may be juxtaposed with an early film projector, and next to it, a gramophone, or a letter from the Wright brothers. This space will truly be a testament to the history of

technology and industry. It will also allow researchers and object devotees to spend time observing, scrutinizing, and pouring over ‘real’ things.

Springing from the Foundation floor below, five distinct railroad bridge arches support the Baldwin locomotive. Beautiful examples of 19th century railroad engineering, these steel and concrete structures were always intended as a demonstration piece for visitors to enjoy. The new collections experience cuts away the ground level slab that had long-since obscured them and brings them back into the public experience. Moreover, the Collections and Curatorial staff will provide on-the-spot lecture or discussions about key objects, and groups will have the opportunity to learn in a collections environment with the Baldwin locomotive at its center. Renderings of The Treasures of The Franklin Institute are included here for reference purposes.


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